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ART AND AUTHENTICITY

BY

AKIHIKO MIYOSHI

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts in Imaging Arts

Rochester Institute of Technology

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ABSTRACT

My MFA thesis show, *After the Last Picture Show*, depicted my inquiry into what pictures and images are today. In this thesis, starting from the formalist tradition of fine art photography, I deconstruct photography into elements based on the classical dichotomy of form and content and discuss how the photographic image has dislodged itself from its material base. Subsequently, I question the objective of art in an age in which images are information, and in which information is instantly exchanged. I use authenticity as the guiding light in my art and attempt to confront the doubts that linger in our simulation-based society.

Further, I start an inquiry into the relationship between the computer and art. I attempt to provide an observation of the computer in terms of itself as opposed to the more frequent approach of analyzing it as a medium to simulate existing tools. I argue that the essence of the computer is abstract, and I describe the conflict between this abstract nature of the computer and the physicality that art demands.

Finally, I conclude by describing what I think of authenticity with regards to art.

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1 After Photography

I remember the time when the Canadian photographer Ed Burtensky visited RIT and talked to us graduate students. He showed us his work, which he brought rolled up inside a tube. His photographs were large or medium in scale, shot with a large format camera, and his images were in color, very formal with rigid composition, and of industrial landscapes.

Something hit me while he took the rolled prints from the tube. In my mind, I thought, “They are all just posters.” For me, posters by themselves were not art objects. They were something one would put on a wall temporarily, and then eventually throw away. He treated them as though they were posters too, presumably because they were just test prints for him. As he talked about his work, he generously threw around the 40 by 60 inch prints on the table.

If photographs were to be churned out infinitely on an inkjet printer, even the highly formal, modernist kind of photographs Burtensky was making, there was nothing inherently significant that separated them from posters. It seemed to me that the superficial practice of limited editioning of photographs was the only thing that was making his work an art object rather than a poster. On that occasion, I intuitively sensed the absurdity of the practice of limited editioning, and foresaw its withering relevance. If one was in fact looking at a mere poster, where was the art? Were we supposed to appreciate pictures of industrial landscape as art? Or were we to observe the tonality and sharpness of the inkjet prints and celebrate the advances in technology?

Matthew Barney, in his extravagant show at the Guggenheim in 2003, perhaps unintentionally makes it very clear that photographs are just posters. Barney filled the Guggenheim with objects, most of them artifacts from his film series *Cremaster*. The show reminded me of an exhibition I saw somewhere that showed artifacts, costumes, and sets from the

movie Star Wars. On the walls of the Guggenheim were photographs encased in Barney's signature waxy looking frames. The photographs depicted the subjects of his films, professionally lit and staged, just like promotional posters for a Hollywood movie. Whatever the artwork was (was it his sculptures or was it his 8 hour long films?), it was very clear that the photographs were not artworks by itself. The pictures by themselves did not make much sense. One would not contemplate the print quality or examine the sharpness of the photographs, and more to the point, the photographs really wouldn't exist if not for his other works of art.

I realized that photographs are inherently no different from posters. They are not art objects in themselves: the function of each is to transmit information that exists outside of the photograph. Once my mind was changed, I could not turn back. I could no longer make sense of the formalist tradition of photography. What was this about? Why is this any good? What does it mean to be good anyway? Is formalist photography based on such dubious grounds that it cannot be redeemed? I wondered.

1.1 Aura and Objectness

At that time, I was interested in what emanated from a work of art. There was something captivating about a work of art that I *felt* instinctively. It was almost magical, and I always thought this was what Walter Benjamin called the "aura."¹ According to Benjamin, aura is the unique presence of a work of art tethered to its own history. Reproducing a work of art detaches the object from tradition (history), and hence it jeopardizes its uniqueness. He characterized what withers in the age of mechanical reproduction as the aura of the work of art.

¹Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt. (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1968).

But his arguments conflicted with my instincts. For me, it did not matter if the work of art was made by a famous artist hundreds of years ago or if it was made by an anonymous person a few minutes ago. A work of art was magical regardless of its history. For some things, it really did not matter if they were reproduced or if they were the originals. When you feel it, you feel it, and it is immediate.

I realized what I felt in a work of art was not necessarily aura, but perhaps presence, or “objectness”. The notion of objectness originates from the ideas of the Minimalists and relates to more contemporary artists such as Robert Irwin and James Turrell, where works of art became something to be experienced.

The difference between aura and objectness, for the purpose of this discussion, is as follows. Aura is something that a piece of work accumulates during its existence: for example, through writings referring to the piece or by trading hands and gaining value. Hence, the aura of an artwork is always delayed. It requires knowledge outside of the object’s presence. The Mona Lisa would not have any aura for those who know nothing about the history of western art or Leonardo Da Vinci. On the other hand, objectness is theatrical and immediate. To experience a work’s objectness, one need not know anything about the object and its history need not be revealed. Objectness cannot be accumulated or simulated, it is what it is and only exists within its own presence.

Photographs or even posters can obtain aura, for example, a collectible poster. But not many posters do. In a culture where images are mass produced, and where we are constantly exposed to new pictures, I think it is difficult if not impossible for a photograph to accumulate aura. One could say the aura of photography has dispersed to a point where it is unperceivable today. I used to think the aura of photography was exhausted or depleted. Now I believe it is just too dispersed. Our attention span is too short for a photograph to

actually acquire aura. We just consume photographs one after another without digesting them. By the time somebody writes about a photograph, it is already *so yesterday*.

When we disregard aura from the art object, what remains is the thing itself. As aura implies historicism, artwork without aura is void of its past and liberated from its future. In this presence of objectness, some art works have an immediate effect on the viewer. *You get it*. It does not matter who made it, nor does it matter whether it has any history. As the Minimalist sculptor Donald Judd rightly points out: "A work needs only to be interesting." For me, this is where the magic seems to happen. Granted that the idea of *interesting* is cultural and is an acquired taste and hence, an art object cannot be purely void of relationship to our past or even our present culture. Objectness in the post-Minimalist, postmodernist age is not something that requires absolute purity. The thing itself can be a sum of various parts but still can be felt as a single entity. Contemporary viewers may have the ability or the literacy to recognize the wholeness within the crossfire of fragments. The works of artists such as Tara Donovan or Fred Tomaselli show obsessive and meticulous formalism, yet seem to be experienced as immediate wholes, and we are not burdened or overwhelmed by their parts.

This distinction between aura and objectness left me to consider, interrogate, and experiment with objectness in the context of the formalist tradition of photography. Here lay a problem: I had concluded that photographs were posters. Unfortunately, posters did not convey objectness to me. Posters and photographs did not have an immediate effect on me, and the magic did not seem to happen.

1.2 Objectness of Photographs

I remember a time when the photographic print was gorgeous and without any presentation such as mats or frames, an object in itself. It was when I spent hours and hours in the darkroom printing silver-gelatin prints using fiber-based paper. The blackest black on the fiber-based photo paper I used was so deep, it had the look of polished metal. Especially when the fiber-based paper was wet, the whites glowed, and the darks absorbed so much light they seemed to have infinite depth.

It was then that I went to see Eugene Smith's prints from his Pittsburgh days at the Carnegie Museum of Art. I did not go to see the images, I went to see the prints. Dark and pitch black areas dominated the frame in his prints. It was almost as though a slab of metal was hanging from the wall, or the steel mills of Pittsburgh he depicted were actually brought to the gallery walls. These were certainly not posters. They were objects and they had presence. This was where my attraction to objectness originated.

Why then did my change of perception occur? What has changed since my encounter with Eugene Smith's prints that made me conclude that photographs were posters without objectness?

In short, I began to understand and appreciate everything that is relevant to the discourse of photography and art from the 1950s up until today. I learnt of Modernism championed by the critic Clement Greenberg. I read about Minimalism and postmodernism. I looked at the works of Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, John Baldessari, Robert Smithson, Vito Acconci, Richard Long, and Ed Ruscha. I was intrigued by Charles Ray. I experienced a Gerhard Richter painting. I felt a Fred Tomaselli piece. Chuck Close's daguerreotypes blew me away. I stood in front of Andreas Gursky photographs. I read the Robert Irwin

book.² I *got* Tom Friedman. I contemplated a Julie Mehretu piece. I went to an Olafur Eliasson show. And in real-time, digital photography happened. As Chrissie Iles, curator of the Whitney Museum of American Art said with regards to the 2004 Whitney Biennial:³

[A shift in our perception occurred] through being overexposed to technology, particularly regarding the photographic image, which has become completely dislodged from its material form. It is becoming what video was to us in the '60s – completely immaterial, take a picture from your cell phone and e-mail it to someone, and now that photography has no material substance, the materiality inherent in painting and drawing is reasserting itself with a force, because with these media there is a certain kind of control over the image, which is impossible with something dematerialized and fluid.

Her statement pinpointed what I felt towards photography. Our culture shifted my perception of photographs: they were now more about information or transmission of information, and photography has nothing to do with paper anymore. How can it? Photographs are now bits and bytes that can be transferred with a click of a mouse. How much of the photographic image that is recorded ends up as a physical object today? Think about all the family photos taken on a digital camera, or photos taken on security cams, web cams, traffic cams that record the world 24/7. What do these images have to do with paper? Photographs are no longer objects, they are information. No wonder they do not convey objectness.

²Lawrence Weschler, *Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1982).

³Tim Griffin, "Out of the Past," *Artforum*, vol. 42 no. 5 (January 2004): 58.

1.3 Photographs as Information

The photographic image in digital form can now be considered independent of any particular media. It can be printed on paper, or even on canvas, or shown on a computer display. Photographs on the web can be viewed by various types of displays of different sizes and color depths. They can be linked and passed along. And the essence of this form of photography is now about what it depicts, not how it depicts. This illuminates the enduring essence of photography, as a record, a document, or as information. Similarly, photographs-as-posters are symbolic manifestations as well as literal ones, as posters function as messengers of information. As Max Bense once said, photography is more about transmission of information than anything else.

The acknowledgment that photography is about information and has no material substance led me to the inevitable question: how do I engage with photography as an artist? Do I focus on the content of the images or do I pursue objectness in itself, independent from photography? This is the classical dichotomy of form versus content: does form take precedence over content, or is it the other way around? While I was open to the idea of pursuing conceptually interesting, content-oriented work, the magic that I was attracted to was based on objectness. Further, I resisted focusing solely on the content of the artwork, as it implied an uncertain viewing experience.

When we make a special effort to go see a picture in a museum or gallery in this image saturated society, we have a certain purpose or expectation. If an image were pure information or purely about its content, we would not need to go to the image, we could summon the content to ourselves, because content is transferable. Hence, we go to museums and galleries instead of downloading information (content) on a computer to experience something that cannot be transferred. If not, we might as well *read* rather than to experience

a Jeff Walls or Andreas Gursky piece on a monitor or in a book. Or to make the point more clear, think of *reading* a Donald Judd piece, or a James Turrell piece. That might be fine. But as an artist, and more specifically, as an object maker, I resist that idea.

Objectness cannot be transferred or dealt with like information. It never loses authority over our experience. We do not doubt objectness. Thus, objectness is essential to the experience of art and that was what I was attracted to: the experience of art through objectness.

1.4 Doubts within Photography

Photography with regards to objectness is problematic, to say the least. With a sense of despair, I came to think the pursuit of such a goal was superficial.

Often times, the only reason a photograph looks good is because of the plexiglass and the frames which house it. (This is not to deny that photographs can be interesting. Making conceptually interesting photographs is a separate issue.) Once you get into the habit of looking past the plexiglass and the frame, a photograph is just a poster. That is why nobody shows photographs without a slick presentation method, unless they are about the idea embedded in the picture. This observation is supported by the countless unsuccessful photography shows that saturate galleries with lightboxes and other desperate display gimmicks. What happens in this situation is that the works all start to look like Donald Judd pieces on the wall. The slick object on the wall takes precedence over the image and becomes a Minimalist sculpture. And one is left to wonder, why have the image at all? Why not just present the object as is without the posters behind it? (And you can't see the posters with the reflections on the plexiglass anyway.)

Still, the pursuit of objectness in photography continues today. There almost seems to

be unwritten rules that many follow in this context:

- Photographs should be as large as possible. As I have heard numerous times from photographers, if you can't make it better, make it bigger.
- Photographs should emit light. For example, use of a lightbox.
- The more off the wall photographs are, the better. Photographs should float or be encased in frames with depth.

The pinnacle of the pursuit of objectness in formalist photography may be Andreas Gursky. His works are more sculptures than photographs. His photographs are larger than most walls. They can be shown only in institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art. When one stands in front of his photographic objects, one is overwhelmed by their sheer presence. One can read the contents of his images and talk about commerce, industrialization, architecture, and so on, but I think this is secondary to his work. Ironically, so many of his works are disseminated as a thumbnail sized images (via the Internet or in print) and rarely do we have the opportunity to experience them as objects: thus, the interpretation of his work mistakenly focuses on the content of the image. This work may be the last of its kind, as he has pushed scale to such a limit that the relationship between the viewer and the object/photographs would become fundamentally different if the objects were to be any larger. That is, he may have created the end of formalist photography of this kind, or at least the prototype.

I find this phenomenon amusing, as it parallels the dialogue between modernist painting and Minimalist objects (or *Literalists* in terms of Michael Fried)⁴ decades ago. In Fried's view, the development of modernist paintings came to a point where it was not clear whether

⁴Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum*, vol. 5 no. 10 (June 1967): 12-23.

they were to be experienced as paintings or as objects, which he found frustrating and hostile to the arts. He found it imperative for paintings to “defeat or suspend [their] own objecthood” to prevent them from being experienced “as nothing more than objects.” By contrast, I celebrate the situation that Fried described as art “degenerating,” where the real distinctions between the arts have crumbled due to the pursuit of theatricality. I believe paintings can be seen as objects and discussed as objects. And I see a similar situation with regards to photography.

Formalist fine-art photography has finally come to a point (albeit a few decades after painting) where it should not be seen merely as photography anymore. Photographs beg to be seen as objects, but they never confess to being objects for fear of not being seen as photographs. Photographers want people to talk about their *images* and not about their *objects*. And this is the problem for me. One cannot have a dialogue about something that hides its true nature or desire. If one does not acknowledge the objectness of photographs, one will always be forced back into the realm of images, and the photographs will stagnate because the relationship between the image and the object will be irreconcilable. And this disharmonious tension leads to the suspicion that photographs are superficially object-like.

This superficiality bothers me. The sense that these works of art do not want to admit that they are objects leaves me uncomfortable because it reminds me of the practice of limited editioning of prints. Limited editioning of prints is a superficial act that turns photographs into unique objects, and perhaps art. It was something that photography gave up as already meaningless to confront in our capitalist society. Limited editioning of photographs has very little to do with the image but more with the market. Similarly, the scale factor of photographs is more a function of market than of artistic merit. They are superficial acts. If photographs were superficially large and object-like, then what is one

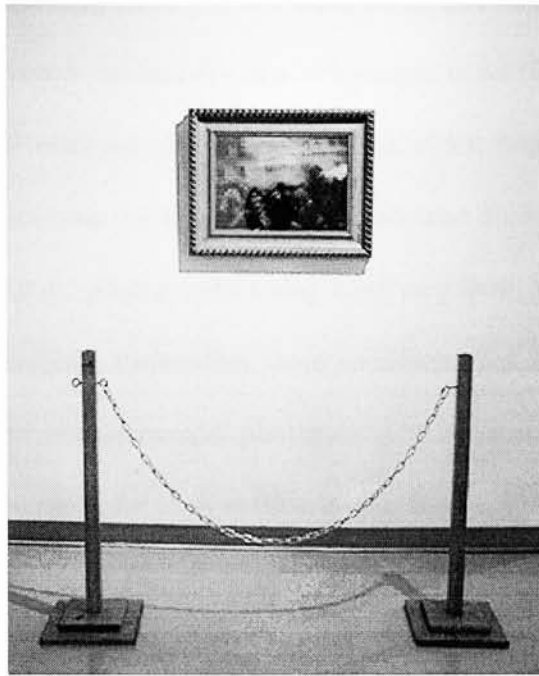


Figure 1: *Ode to the Pictorialists*, Mixed Media, 2004

supposed to make of the experience one has when viewing these works? Is it possible that the experience might be haunted with superficiality?

The piece in my 2004 MFA exhibition, *Ode to the Pictorialists* (Figure 1), is a direct response to this departure from the innocent and naive view of photography. It is both a relic and a declaration of my position with regards to art and photography.

1.5 From Photography

My doubts regarding photography led me to two conclusions:

- Aura and objectness need to be separated from photographs and art objects in general.
- The essence of photography is about information, and objectness in photography is more or less manufactured and superficial.

I realize that aura and objectness are two separate entities and that aura is perhaps a soon to be outmoded idea in a day and age in which images in particular are consumed at an incredible speed. Speed works against the idea of aura which demands contemplation. As discussed earlier, what interests me is a more immediate and direct effect a work of art has through objectness. Further, photographs today have very little to do with their material form and it is more convenient to consider them as information rather than as objects. I consider the current trend of monumental photographs to be more or less driven by market forces and not for choices made for their artistic merit. Hence, I regard the current pursuit of objectness in photography as superficial. As the quote below suggests, the object form that the photographic image takes becomes indiscriminate.

Digital broke the link that always chained photographs to the visible world, obscuring the inherently fictive qualities of photography. Without that link, the imaginative traffic between photographs and mediums like painting and drawing is more promiscuous.⁵

If photographs, especially digital photographs, dislodged themselves from their material form, there is no reason for the photographic image (content) not to end up as a painting (form). For that matter, it could end up as any other conceivable form: sound, sculpture, light, or text. In my case, I decided that it should end up as a painting.

1.6 Authenticity

Recalling the discussion about objectness, people go to see art objects to experience something that cannot be disputed, especially because so many things, including photographs, are subject to doubt. A photograph of a Gerhard Richter painting is worlds apart from

⁵March 7, 2004, Photo synthesis by Christopher Knight, LA Times

an actual Gerhard Richter painting. And this, in an age when everything is a copy or a simulation, is why we go to museums and galleries. Perhaps objectness is the only thing that cannot be simulated in our current art practices. Even though we might celebrate the simulated world or the state of the hyperreal,⁶ don't we still long for something real or authentic? Don't we somehow appreciate a handwritten letter more than an e-mail even though the content may be equivalent?

As long as the sophisticated viewer is able to decode the simulated as a simulation, he/she will have chronic desire for the authentic experience. For the sophisticated viewer, there is guilt or doubt that cannot be redeemed by anything less than the authentic. For example, I would guess many art historians or art history professors would have a dilemma with regards to talking about a work of art they had never seen in person before. This comes from the apprehension that all the reproduced images in the world, and all the text or supplemental material about the piece, will never amount to experiencing the work of art first hand. This exemplifies the essence of our relationship with the work of art. There is always doubt in what is simulated or copied, or something that is not *it*, because one cannot claim *authenticity* over the experience, and this doubt about its authenticity often leads to guilt in accepting or propagating the simulated experience. Doubt always lingers around simulations, as they have tendencies or desires to hide and blur their nature. This tendency to disguise feels unauthentic and sometimes insincere. When the simulated gains independence from the original, when it starts to stand on its own, released from the original it was referring to, then it may shine on its own terms. When the simulated declares itself to be a simulation, then it opens up the possibility for an authentic experience over the simulation.

⁶Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983).

Photography, especially “straight” photography, has become problematic because we can no longer distinguish it from a simulation. With the advent of Photoshop, doubt always lingers around straight photographs, unless an explicit attempt to reveal their authenticity is made.⁷ In painting or illustration, authenticity is inherently clearer. As a result, the authority of photography as a nonfictive device is now in constant jeopardy. One cannot look at a photograph today and know what is straight and what is simulated. As recent incidents indicate, a correspondent for a newspaper in Afghanistan may Photoshop people out before he sends the images to his editors. Straight photographs carry so much uncertainty with regards to their construction, and this uncertainty gets in the way when experiencing them as images. This lingering doubt causes the image to implode. The correspondent in Afghanistan was fired immediately after the fact was known, although the “manipulated” image probably told the intended story more effectively. One wonders: if the correspondent were an illustrator or an embedded drafts person instead of a photographer, what would of happened? When photography relinquishes its role as a nonfictive device and truly accepts its fictive qualities, it may regain its authenticity. But we are not there yet.

The authenticity of any art work comes to bare when it reveals its own construction. It need not be pure in a Greenbergian way. You don’t need to use a hammer and hit someone in the head to let them know that the work is “paint on canvas.” If you look, you can tell if someone is trying to deceive you. Whatever the content of the object is, one needs to be able to trust it in order to start a dialogue. Thus, artworks should not hide their own construction. They should be authentic to what they are, or else a sense of doubt lingers and the work becomes unproductive.

So it occurred to me to make work based on this premise. That is, I wanted to make

⁷I have seen multiple photography shows where the photographs were labeled with the information that they were not “Photoshopped.”

work that one really had to see in person in order to discard the doubt that came with the art piece. Looking at the reproduction of the work would confuse the viewer. The viewer will never be certain as to what he/she is looking at. If one were to see the work in person, its own construction would be revealed. This experience would be immediate and undisputable. Painting was a perfect medium for this purpose as all the marks and traces were left for the viewer to observe.

1.7 The Banal

Thus, I concluded that we go to see works of art to experience their objectness, and I acknowledged that this experience is more authentic than the experience we have when viewing works in reproduced prints. Consequently, for my paintings, it was natural for me to choose images that conveyed that authenticity. When I considered what images I might use, I immediately looked for “banal” images. An image from a web cam, traffic cam, or a security camera felt like something that was so banal, so untouched by the hands of man, it was as authentic as any photographic image could possibly be.

It may be the unassuming quality of banal images. Banal images do not attempt to be anything else. They do not attempt to deceive the viewer. I recently encountered an image that was of the snapshot aesthetic, where part of the serious subject was cropped out dramatically and out of focus. The photograph was actually taken using an 8x10 view camera. Perhaps due to the serious subject matter (AIDS), I felt something insincere. It was not the idea of the photographer sticking a large view camera in the face of a dying man that made me feel uncomfortable; it was the doubt that came with the snapshot aesthetic that was simulated with the use of a cumbersome and time-consuming view camera. The fact that I had to cast doubt on an image of such serious nature was the problem. Images

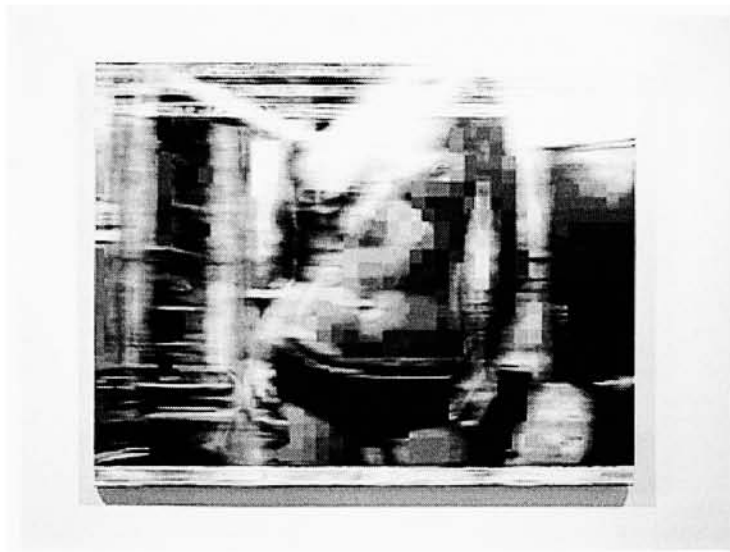


Figure 2: Woman, Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 40x54 in, 2004



Figure 3: Still Life, Oil on Canvas, 40x52 in, 2004



Figure 4: Landscape, Acrylic on Canvas, 40x58 in, 2004

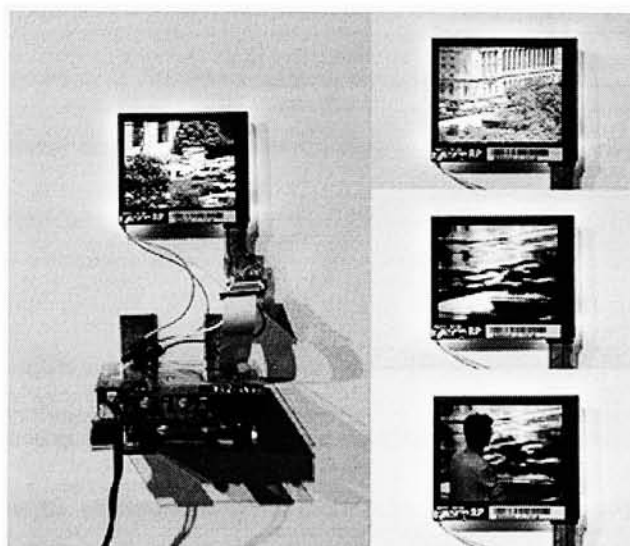


Figure 5: Pictures, Mixed Media, 2004

from web cams or traffic cams feel truer and more authentic as *they are what they are*.

Popular culture, saturated by the simulated or the hyperreal, leaves a vacuum, a lack of authenticity. The banal, by subverting the simulated and the hyperreal, fills the vacuum, and thus is more authentic. I created a series based on this assumption. I pursued objectness by creating paintings based on the photographic image, but a photographic image that was banal and an antithesis to the hyperreal. Further, these works, in reproduction, cast doubt as to what they are. One would not be sure what they were looking at: photograph, a digital image, or a painting? When the art works were experienced in person, they would eliminate the doubts with regards to their construction. (See Figures 2 - 5.) They are what they are. The work is photographic, digital, and painterly at the same time.

2 The Relationship Between Computers and Art

While I was working on my paintings, I used the computer to create the images I would paint. During that process, I often wondered what it really meant to make art work using the computer. Observation of the computer in terms of itself and not in terms of any other simulated media seemed like a natural progression. Actually, it seemed to be the most important question that one can ask when thinking about the relationship between art and the computer.

Computers have infiltrated all forms of the art making process. Photographers use computers to manipulate and retouch images. Computers have replaced the traditional “wet” darkroom processes with software such as Adobe Photoshop. Indeed, Photoshop changed the fundamental attitude towards photography and how we look at pictures. Sculptors now create three dimensional structures in the computer; rapid prototyping enables them to create physical objects out of data in the computer. Painters use computers for inspi-

ration and to create source images. Stenciling became an important technique to create sharp edges. Computers leave marks distinctly different from the ones created by traditional brush strokes, and they have changed the aesthetics of painting. They may be only the subtle difference between a subject that is painted through projection and one that is painted by direct observance, but somehow one can *tell* that a computer was used in the process.

Although the inclusion of the computer into the studio changed the way artists work and the way art objects look, I believe that artists have not yet touched the core of this medium. In some sense, art has been encircling the essence of the computer. Computers have been used mostly to *enhance* or to *simulate* the already existing medium. For example, the success of inkjet prints are discussed in terms of how close they come to traditional photographic C-prints. The syntax used in Adobe Photoshop closely follows the methodology of a traditional photographic darkroom. Photoshop closely *simulates* the darkroom. The problem with this mode of simulation is that computers inherit the limits of what they simulate. For example, by simulating photography, image-manipulating software such as Photoshop assumes without much inquiry that images should not move, not make noise, or only be two dimensional. One may never question why, because the ideal is gauged upon photography.

The use of computers to simulate existing media highlights one distinctive aspect of the computer: It is a tool that is extremely malleable. It is a tool that is capable of creating new tools, which again further hold the potential to create even more sophisticated tools. In summary, it is a *meta*-tool. The only limiting factor for the development of tools in the computer is one's imagination and one's ability to program the computer. One can easily direct a computer to parallel the features of a traditional medium and create a tool that

simulates an existing medium. This is what we currently see happening in the arts. But this only begins to touch the potential of the computer as a meta-tool, and the fundamental *meta-ness* of the computer is not yet fully exposed. If one expands one's imagination, there is always the potential to create a tool in the computer that may turn a brush into a musical instrument that makes objects.

2.1 The Dilemma of the Computer

Initially I thought it was just a matter of eliminating limits from existing tools or programs to crack open the potential of the computer as a meta-tool. It turns out that this is harder than I anticipated, because once the limits are gone, the essence of the computer spills out like water and one really does not have a lid to keep it from spilling away. I am starting to suspect that by thinking about computers in terms of art, computers are inheriting the limitations of art.

So, what is the essence of the computer? The components that make up a computer are not something that are of true essence to the computer. Unlike paint or canvas, the CPU or memory does not represent computation. The hardware that implements the computer has very little to do with what the computer does. The hardware is a means to an end, just like the camera is a means to an end to produce a photographic image. The essence of photography lies in the photographic image and not in the apparatus. The computer hardware is similarly an apparatus. The essence of the computer is abstract. It is about logic, algorithms, and math. We program to interact with these abstract ideas and operations. The act of programming is our way of communicating our intent into these abstract entities.

In this world of the computer, any link to physicality is lost because computers deal only

with the abstract. So much is detached from the actual act of seeing, touching, and hearing; one is required to think in different ways, and challenged to experience in impossible ways. All tangible entities exist in our mind and the computer interacts with the entities in our minds. Usually, the only physical access we have into this world is through a small peephole called a display, and even that is not a direct experience at all. The view we have on the display is a translated approximate copy of what is happening inside the computer. It is not the actual thing. It can never be. The actual phenomenon inside has no form. The operating system that runs on top of the hardware takes extra steps to *visualize* this formless entity so that we can have something to reference. The text one sees on the display is not actual text. It is a representation of an abstract entity we decided to translate into text, and look at as text.

We have been building an environment using abstractions in the computer ever since it was invented. Any and every computer is void of any relationship to the world we occupy without this environment. Through abstraction and metaphors, *we* create something that we can cling onto so we do not get lost in the void. We create things like windows, files, and desktops. We are creating a map for a world we cannot yet enter. We ask the computer to operate in these abstract environments that have no direct link to the real. They are just bits and bytes as far as the computer is concerned. We are occasionally allowed to look into this world indirectly through the peephole.

When we scan a photograph of a child into the computer, that image loses its materiality and becomes an abstract entity. The only thing that connects that abstract entity to our idea of the image of a child is this mapping we create. As far as the computer is concerned, there is no digital image of a child, as the computer knows nothing of the image or the child. We introduce these idea into the computer. Into our map, into this void, we add an

entry for “image” and “child” We construct the map and the world inside the computer.

Once this map between our real and the computer’s abstract becomes damaged, we are left in the dark. A physical photograph can be scratched or partially torn, but it still maintains its photograph-ness. A digital image can lose parts of its data and quickly lose its association with an image and reveal its abstractness. Most image viewing software will not open a corrupt image file complaining that it is in an unrecognizable format. The mapping is lost. Once the mapping is lost, it is just noise. Digital images cannot be scarred or creased like physical photographs because we have not described to the computer what that signifies. Yet just as torn photographs carry meaning, I believe a broken digital image has the potential to carry meaning.

What I suspect is that there are vast reaches of abstract space waiting to be mapped. One problem related to the unmapped territories within the realm of computers is that we do not yet have a dictionary or even a vocabulary to distinguish between something that is noise and something that is not in this abstract environment. It is as though we do not have the word *cat* to recognize the thing that sheds fur and purrs. Hence, we really cannot differentiate *cat* from *tac* or *atc* in the abstract world of computers. We have no idea whether it is something or nothing. A cat inside the world of computers is waiting to be discovered. It will continue to be thus until we find a way to renegotiate these abstract entities in terms of art, and expand our vocabularies.

2.2 The Abstract and its Physicality

The environment we build in the computer is a monstrous and frighteningly complex accumulation of abstraction. It is this intersection between the abstract and the physical/real that we deal with as programmers, or perhaps as artists. And it is in this conflict between

the abstract and the objectness or physicality that art demands, where I find myself. The process of mapping requires the artist or the programmer to link the abstract world of the computer to the physical experience that is art.

For example, the conflict can be illustrated as follows: Most of us take the mathematical operation called subtraction $1 - 1 = 0$ as a given. But if we did not have a grasp of the thing called “number”, and we were asked what would happen if we subtracted one apple from another apple, we might be confused. Where does that apple go? How can you start with one apple and another apple and end up with nothing? An apple just does not disappear. Or better, $2 \times 3 = 6$? Multiply two apples with three more apples? If we keep the physicality of the apples, even the simplest abstract operation becomes an impossibility. And this enormous gap between the abstract world and the physical world needs to be resolved with some consistency in the context of art.

Can anything represent or materialize truly abstract ideas? How does one connect this abstractness to the real world of art? Fissures start to show when we must commit to the materiality or the physicality of the output so that we can actually see, hear, or touch the result. The essence of the computer is so abstract, we have not managed to experience it directly in a way that matches our physical interface. (I.e., we cannot directly experience the abstract using our eyes, ears, or other such senses.)

If one cannot directly represent abstract entities in a recognizable way, one might make an instance to convert the abstract into something that it is not. For example, one could deal with the concept of a *tree* in its abstract form in the computer, and then make an instance of the *tree* when the *tree* needs to leave the abstract world of computers. But creating an instance presents obvious problems. For example, as we attempt to visualize these abstract activities (math/logic/algorithms), say as a two-dimensional entities, we immediately enter

the aesthetics of 2D images. And the aesthetics of the image and the abstract may not be compatible. Ironically, this leads to the situation where a radically interesting abstract activity based on logic may produce lackluster images. Or conversely, one may be forced to pursue meaningless abstract activities to get pretty pictures. As a result the dialogue shifts unconsciously from within the internal domain of the computer to the external domain of flat pictures.

Thus, an attempt to visualize logic or math is extremely challenging as our eyes are strongly tethered to the aesthetics based on our physical visual experience, and logic is not. Perhaps certain people, such as mathematicians, may see elegance or beauty in a mathematical formula in its true abstract form, but most do not. But I am optimistic, as aesthetics is an acquired taste. We just have not yet acquired the aesthetic of the abstract. Anthropologists reported that photographs were not recognized as something to be *read* in a remote culture when people saw photographs for the first time. They could not associate the image of a ship to the actual ship. They only saw a flat piece of paper with texture. Similarly, we may be oblivious to the aesthetics of the abstract because we do not yet have the literacy necessary to read them.

So, the problem of the computer lies in the the conflict between the abstract and the physical. And this problem is an unsolved one as of this writing, but I envision two viable approaches:

- Intersection of media
- Expansion of interface

2.3 Intersection of Media

As mentioned previously, computers have this marvelous ability to simulate whatever they are told to. One way to challenge the computer's limits and to expand the confines of the media it simulates is to operate in the intersections of these media. We need to turn the computer into a brush that is a musical instrument that makes sculptural objects.

In the 90s, the word *multimedia* was often used to describe the efforts made by artists to use various media simultaneously. For example, they would use movies, images, sound, and text, often on a CD-ROM. What I have in mind is somewhat different. In multimedia pieces, various media just coexisted. The existence of one media did not challenge the fundamental nature of the other. It was like a salad where tomatoes and lettuce just sit next to each other. I envision something like a stew. It would be amusing if one could not distinguish whether something was a movie or an image or text.

For the piece titled, *Reading the New York Times, Aug 13. 2003* (Figure 6), I wrote a program that reads the articles posted on the New York Times web page. Each sentence in the articles is parsed and its grammar is analyzed. From the grammatical structure of the sentence, words that are relevant to the sentence are identified and recorded. Simultaneously, the connections between these words are recorded. For example, if the program was given the sentence, *The dog went to school*, the words *dog* and *school* would be recorded as well as the connection between these words. Then, I made a graph of this structure (Figure 7). Each word is represented as a node (an ellipse) with unique colors, and every connection is represented as a line that connects the appropriate nodes. As some words turned up more than others and had more connections, I made the size of the ellipse larger proportional to the number of connections. The ellipses themselves did not show the actual words that they represented. Instead, I provided a color coded table next to the graph (Figure 8) to

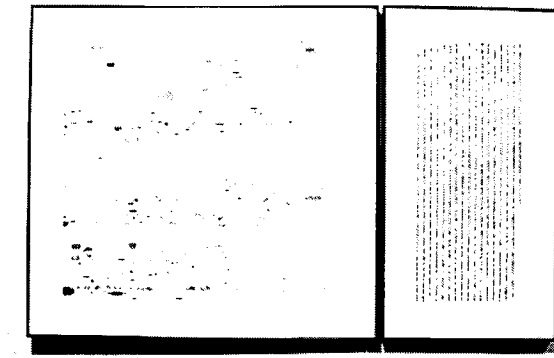


Figure 6: Reading the New York Times, Aug 13. 2003, 2003, Inkjet Print, 2003

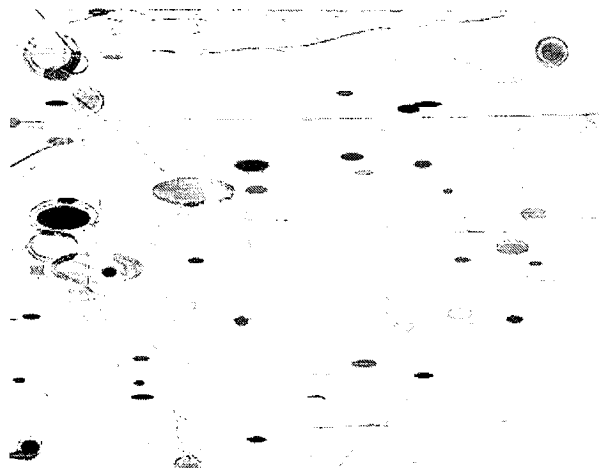


Figure 7: Detail: Reading the New York Times, Aug 13. 2003, 2003, Inkjet Print, 2003

decode what words the ellipses represented.

This piece exists in the intersection between the domains of text, pictures, and logic. One could *read* this piece, or *experience* it through the aesthetics of pictures, or *decipher* its logic. And while this piece was taking form, I noticed that the traversal of domains from text, to pictures, to logic stimulated the deconstruction of the subject, thereby revealing its hidden structures. Text has structures that we take for granted. The structure of a sentence is called grammar. One can expand the limits of this grammatical structure to encompass

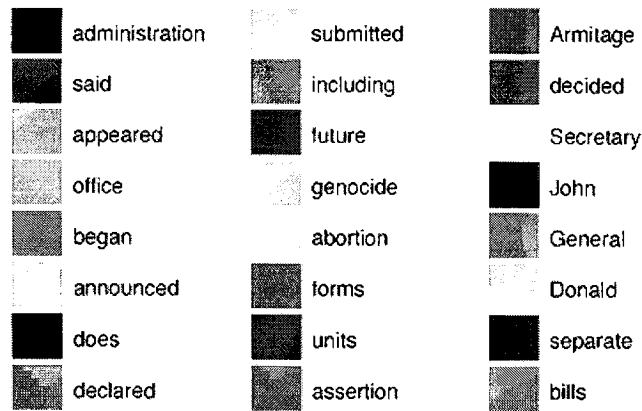


Figure 8: Detail: Reading the New York Times, Aug 13. 2003, 2003, Inkjet Print, 2003

all the articles in the New York Times. When this structure is represented in the domain of pictures, it can start a dialogue with another structure that comes from a remote domain other than text. Perhaps it is in this dialogue, that we are challenged to open our minds. We are invited to participate in the aesthetics of structures rather than in the aesthetics of pictures. This *new way of looking* has something to do with abstract thinking. It is as though abstract logic peeled a segment off of physical reality and became an entity in itself.

This reminds me of the experience I had when I learned that ether carried TV signals. From that time on, I could not see the sky the way I used to. I now see the sky with aurora-like TV signals raining and flowing over us. And it is this kind of experience that a *new way of looking* can bring to you. Perhaps the true essence of the computer is its ability to mess with your head, and perhaps this might be art.

2.4 Expansion of Interfaces

We experience the way we do because of the bodies we have. We are stuck with the aesthetics we have because of the interfaces that are available to us. Perhaps, it is time for us to expand our interfaces and enter uncharted territories.

As I have argued, the peephole that is the display allows us a glimpse into the abstract world of computers. The difficulty in presenting the logical and abstract entity of the computer is that there is a gap between the abstract and our human interface, the eyes, ears, and tactile senses.

Creating a bridge between these two worlds through new interfaces is another possibility in resolving the confrontation between the arts and the abstract. The computer could extend its interface towards us, and we could expand our interfaces towards what is in front of us. An ideal interface may be to connect our minds directly into the computer. Perhaps then, the physicality that was lost may be regained. The closest experience we have to this may be the experience of listening to music via a headphone. We *feel* music originating from inside our head, or, if engineered correctly, from any place within our physical space. It is in this physicality of sound through the interface of headphones that I find hope.

The genre of interactive art is an attempt to build this bridge. Interactive art is about giving a new user-interface to the abstract black hole of the computer. But surprisingly, interactive art has always been an enigma for me. For all logical reasons, it should be interesting or something that I would be attracted to. It deals with our senses, and our presence. But I have never been impressed with most interactive art. I just didn't "feel it", even though computers and the sensors claimed to feel me. It was more a wall than a bridge.

This perhaps goes back to the suspicion I have towards the simulated-real, with its obvious intent to hide its artificial nature. If something is constructed out of sensors, it should be sensors and not attempt to be human. If it is a video camera, it should remain a camera and not an eye. An infrared sensor should sense infrared light and not our presence. What these machines ultimately would be, I am not sure. But on the other hand, when

the direct cause and effect of the operations of the machine is so obvious, it is problematic for me as well. What is one supposed to think of a switch, when flipped, that would turn a light bulb on? Where is the art in this?

Should the interface between us and the world we cannot enter be invisible? Should it be autonomous? Perhaps what really matters is what is on the other side of the interface.

3 Conclusion: Art and Authenticity

So I find myself within these conflicting impulses with regards to photography, art, computers, and machines. When does something that is made by the hands of man transcend into art? I discovered that objectness is an important element for me in a time when everything else can be simulated. I value objectness in works of art because it cannot be disputed. Its experience is authentic.

Perhaps then the underlying question I am interested in, in all my works, is how and when something becomes *authentic*. Authenticity is what I long for in my work, but does authenticity, without doubt, warrant art? Probably not. Authenticity exists because of our ability to doubt and to critically engage in what is in front of us. Then, if we were to accept these propositions, how can artists maintain integrity in their art when everything is touted as real or hyper-real? Perhaps we may have to wait for a world where the perfect simulacrum truly does not know its origin like the replicant named Rachel in the film *Blade Runner*⁸ in order to be liberated from our longing for authenticity. And perhaps it is when our pasts are liquidated and we live in the perpetual present. Humans are humans because they *were* not machines. And machines are machines because they *were* not humans. This difference is becoming infinitely small. And perhaps the trajectories of these two entities

⁸Giuliana Bruno, "Ramble City: Postmodernism and Blade Runner," *October*, vol. 41 (1987): 61-74.

will intersect and pass each other, leaving a slight afterimage of doubt. Then we will be left to renegotiate what art and authenticity are. I look forward to participating in this dialogue. Until then, the only thing I can do as an artist, is to suggest the possibility of that doubt.

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